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Battered Laotian Tribe Fears U.S. Will Abandon It

By FOX BUTTERFIELD
Special to The New York Times

SITE 288, Laos, Oct. 5—Years ago, before the North Vietnamese first shelled this village with their big guns, Yong Dua Mua was a great chief among the Meo people. He had rich rice fields on the high mountains, pigs, chickens and a dozen water buffalo.

"Everything a man needs to live we had," he recalls.

Since then many of the chief's family and friends have died fighting in the Meo irregular army that is supported by the United States Central Intelligence Agency. A quarter of his own people have been lost, and the survivors, encamped in this place that does not even have a name, are refugees dependent on American aid dropped from the air.

Fatigue and Fear

It is a fate shared by nearly 200,000 Meos remnants of a proud race of mountain warriors, because since they took up arms—American arms—to fight the North Vietnamese, they have been driven out of their homeland in Northern Laos and into their series of crowded valleys and ridge tops around Ban Son, about 70 miles north of Vientiane.

The Meos are tired, and they are afraid that the United States will abandon them to their enemy—in Meo the word for "Vietnamese" and for "enemy" are one and the same. The Hanoi radio feeds their fear with daily broadcasts about antiwar feeling in the United States.

"If the Vietnamese attack us once more this year and the Americans do not help us, I will just have to stay here and die," said Mr. Yong, who has been a refugee from his home north of the Plaine des Jarres since 1960. "We cannot move again."

Between the North Vietnamese and the refugee settlements lies only the irregular army's redoubt at Long Tieng, which was partly breached last spring and is considered highly vulnerable.

South of Site 288, there are no more mountains into which to flee, only the hot and humid

Vientiane plain that the Meos, accustomed to living at heights above 3,000 feet, find uninhabitable.

Chief Yong and other Meo leaders interviewed in a tour of refugee villages near Ban Son this week believe that their plight is inevitable, as in a classical tragedy.

"When I was young my grandparents used to tell me that the Chinese and Vietnamese had oppressed us and taken our land for generations," said the chief, a tall, heavyset man much bigger than the average short, wiry Meo. "Even if I had known 10 years ago what I know now, I would have made the same decision to fight and not accept the Vietnamese. There was no choice."

As he spoke a flight of United States Air Force F-4 Phantom jet fighters flew over on their way to bomb North Vietnam. In the distance a small Continental Air Services transport, chartered to the Agency for International Development, circled lazily over a nearby village, dropping large burlap sacks of rice.

The agency is feeding most of the people in this area from the relief center at Ban Son, doling out rice, cornmeal, canned beef and cooking oil. Whenever the Meos can settle in one place long enough, they try to grow their own vegetables.

Although Site 288 and the hundred other settlements jammed together near Ban Son are still in the mountains, things do not look right to the Meos.

An Unfamiliar Environment

With all the crowding, there is little left of the luxuriant dark green rain forest on which they have always depended for fuel and building material. There is almost no land to slash and burn to plant upland rice. Traditionally they measured distances by the number of days it took to walk to the nearest village, but they now can hear their neighbors talking.

One of the few signs of progress at Site 288 is the six-year village school, but there are only half as many pupils as there were three years ago, before the last big North Vietnamese drive.

Each settlement also has a small dispensary supplied by A.I.D. Thousands of Meos have caught malaria during their migrations because they had lived at altitudes where mosquitoes and had no immunity.

Chief Yong's village original-

ly lay in the rich mountain land halfway between the Plaine des Jarres and the North Vietnamese border. One night in December, 1960, he recalls, the Communists "fired their big guns into our homes" without warning.

"I could not tell you the reason why they did it, I do not know much," he added, holding certain words for emphasis in the beautiful, lilting Meo tonal language. "I cannot read or write."

Volunteers Without Pay

After that, the chief related, almost all the young men in his village went to join the army. "There was no pay in those days, they all just volunteered," he said.

The force he referred to was being put together by a young, tough and ambitious major in the regular Laotian Army, Vang Pao, himself a Meo. Now a major general, Vang Pao went into hiding south of the Plaine des Jarres early in 1961 and began recruiting the mountain tribesmen to battle the Vietnamese invaders.

As his force grew General Vang Pao also began receiving arms and training from a small group of Americans known as a "white star team," predecessors of the Special Forces, who landed clandestinely at his headquarters at Padong. Simultaneously, American planes started dropping food to Meo villagers who had been forced to flee.

Meo leaders interviewed this week and the Americans who helped organize General Vang Pao's force deny, as has sometimes been charged, that the United States made a secret deal to get the Meos to fight.

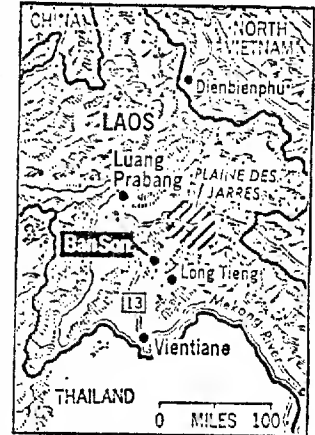
"There was no deal, the Meo wanted to fight and needed arms, we wanted to stop the Communists," said Edgar Buell, the A.I.D. officer who served as the Americans' first contact with General Vang Pao.

Polley Developed 'Gradually'

"At first no one thought the war would last more than six months," he explained. "It was only gradually as the fighting went on that we began to see the need to drop food to them and then to start paying the soldiers. The Meo aren't mercenaries, like people are always saying. If they were, I couldn't have worked with them all these years."

American officials here, many of whom have spent as much as 10 years in Laos, feel a deep sense of responsibility for the fate of the Meos. Knowledge that the arming of the Meos may have helped provoke North Vietnamese as-

"Even though it was only a marriage of convenience and we made no promises," a high-ranking official who requested



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Meo refugees are camped in the Ban Son area.

anonymity said, "I personally feel in my heart a deep moral commitment. The problem is, these people are just too pure for the filthy world we so-called developed countries have created for them."

There are no accurate statistics on the number of Meos, civilian and military, who have lost their lives in the war. Estimates of the original number in this country, whose population is thought to be about three million, run from 200,000 to 350,000. Of these 80,000 to 100,000 are believed to be in areas under Communist control, according to Mr. Buell, who has spent more time working with the Meos than any other American.

Hospital Has Been Full

One of the few reliable estimates of military casualties is based on the relief rolls at Ban Son, which, informed sources say, list 4,500 widows of Meo soldiers and 5,000 to 6,000 disabled veterans.

This fall the 260-bed hospital at Ban Son has been full of

continued

CIA HOOKEE

E. B. del Rosario
Wash.-Ala. Regional Coordinator - V.V.A.W.

Part One

In any given weekend night at the Constellation Bar and Restaurant, even the most casual tourist may find himself rubbing elbows with agents of half a dozen countries. These agents go under various official titles and capacities, such as "information specialists," "rural development technician," or "embassy official," but most all of them can be placed into one occupational category - espionage. The main attraction of the Constellation is the agents, and not the music or the food; for at Suzanne's down the road, one can get better, especially food. But since there's not much happening in Vientiane, and there's few places to go to hide, the Constellation becomes the center of activity on weekends. After official working hours, this little city by the Mekhong River tries to become a miniature Saigon but without the wartime conditions of its bigger sister.

While the resident agents are pursuing the music, lights and slenderly built Lao "puying," another group of men are busy under bright flood lights at Wattay Airport, working hurriedly, but competently, to prepare silver unmarked airplanes for early morning flights. At the ramps of Air America and Continental Air Services, Filipino, Chinese and Thai mechanics are checking, adjusting, tuning and reassembling every functional part of the aircraft which must carry people and cargo over the entire length of Laos. One by one, the DC-3's, C-46's, C-123's, Caribous, Pilatus, Porters and Helio Couriers are checked and double checked, for these planes must fly over some of the most primitive terrain and under primitive conditions for four to ten hours daily. As each aircraft is released by the flight mechanics, other men take over the preparation of the plane. Lao laborers hump hundred-pound sacks of rice or cornmeal up the inclined belly of the C-46's or cargo of military wares into the Caribous and C-123's.

Before the first rays of sunlight break on the cheeks of Buddhist monasteries, pilots are receiving their briefings and assignments from the operations sections. "Captina, you're on Sixty Zulu this morning. Your DZ's are Sixty-three, Eleven, Five and One-Seven-Three. Weather is overcast at four thousand, broken at twenty-five hundred. Double-check your recognition signal at Site Five . . . the Pathet Lao took Site Thirteen last night." "Jim, take Fourteen Tango to Lima Two-five and pick up customer cargo." Take off is at Zero-Six-Thirty."

The tone of the voice of the briefer is as casual as the night life of the espionage agents and as casual as a bus drive. The pilots of the aircraft fly cargos that would horrify the average United States citizen, the person who must pay for the operations of the CIA's airlines. In the seemingly innocent briefing given to pilot Jim are words which may open congressional investigations which will make all other investigations into the U.S. overseas operations seem trivial. Broken down into layman's language, the briefing means, "Jim, fly the C-46 cargo plane to Ban Houie Sai and bring back a load of opium." On a flight between Ban Houie Sai, a town in the center of the "Golden Triangle," the world's richest opium growing region, a C-46 aircraft can carry between 12,000 to 14,000 pounds of opium. On some days, three or four aircraft make such flights out of Ban Houie Sai.

Note About the Author: Del Rosario was an employee of Continental Air Services in 1967. As an "operations assistant" based out of Vientiane, Laos, he was responsible for the monitoring of all flights in Laos for that CIA-financed transport corporation and for the loading and unloading of all cargo. As an associate to a British citizen studying the languages of the Meo and Yao hill tribes in the Golden Triangle, del Rosario was able to learn much about the opium culture of the region. On February 4, 1972, he testified in San Francisco before representatives of the national press and television networks about his observations in Laos. Parts of his testimony will be appearing in the next issue.

SCANDAL

STATINTL

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editorials

Eye on high

With the electronic battlefield fast becoming a reality and the Navy planning to wire the northern quarter of Wisconsin to make the world's largest radio antenna, it should come as no surprise to good citizens that federal technocrats have devised the ultimate weapon in the war against illegal drug trafficking: "Space Narc."

Space Narc is the nickname for a planned orbiting satellite capable of detecting fields of marijuana and opium poppies from 100 miles above the earth. Ian Fleming couldn't have done better.

The U.S. Treasury Department's bureau of narcotics and dangerous drugs is currently spending \$2 million on the project to determine methods by which the plants can be identified by the satellite.

The Department of Agriculture is cooperating with the bureau by growing three large fields of marijuana in Texas, Arizona and Florida to serve as test targets for Space Narc's eye.

Should the satellite prove to be effective it might also prove embarrassing for another governmental agency, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), if there is any truth in the charges made last week by the editor of Earth magazine that the agency is involved in the smuggling of millions of dollars worth of heroin into the United States each year.

The magazine cited a study conducted by a professor at the University of California that traces the connections between opium growers, CIA operatives, flights of CIA-controlled airlines and the eventual delivery of heroin to the United States.

A former civilian aide to Continental Air Services (a CIA organization) said in San Francisco Friday that he witnessed opium being loaded aboard aircraft in Laos and Thailand and that he had seen hundreds of acres of cultivated opium fields planted by the CIA-supported Meo tribesmen.

A former member of the U.S. Special Forces also said this week he was assigned by the CIA to trade arms for opium grown by the Meo tribesmen, who would then fight for the CIA against the revolutionary forces in the area.

The possibility that the bureau of narcotics will use Space Narc to uncover the double-handed dealings of the CIA, however, is obviously naive. Space Narc, if successful, will undoubtedly circle the earth indicating field after lush field of taboo weed in every country graced with a suitable climate. This information, however, is neither new nor useful. The government knows already that opium-growing and exporting is a major industry in many Asian countries. Aside from general discouragement and threats of foreign aid stoppage, there is little the U.S. has done, or for that matter, can do about it.

THE LEGEND OF TONY POE, CIA

U.S. operations in Southeast Asia have often involved shadowy figures, perhaps none more shadowy than the elusive, Jekyll-

Hyde figure of Anthony A. Poshepny

MEN AT WAR/BY DONALD KIRK

HE'S A ROUND-FACED, cheery man with a cherubic smile and a charming family and, it is said, a penchant for preserving the heads of his victims in formaldehyde. He's a classic Jekyll-and-Hyde who has been waging the most secret phase of America's secret war in Southeast Asia for the past ten years.

To the boys at Napoleon Cafe and the Derby King on Bangkok's Patpong Road, a watering ground for Air America pilots, CIA types, journalists and other assorted old Indochina hands, he's just plain Tony Poc, but his real name is Anthony A. Poshepny. He's a refugee from Hungary, an ex-Marine who fought on Iwo Jima and a dedicated patriot of his adopted land, the United States of America, for which he has risked his life on literally hundreds of occasions while ranging through the undulating velvet-green crags and valleys of Red China, Laos and Thailand.

He also shuns publicity and hates reporters, as I discovered in a long search for him, beginning in the Thai capital of Bangkok and extending to the giant American airbases in northeastern Thailand and to the mountains of northern Laos. The search for Tony Poc ended where it had begun, in the lobby of the Amarin Hotel on Bangkok's Ploenchit Road, a crowded, six-lane-wide avenue that runs through a residential and shopping district supported largely by rich American "farangs," the somewhat demeaning Thai term for "foreigners." There, before leaving Bangkok for the last time, I picked up a note, signed simply "Tony," stating that he had to "decline" my request for an interview. "I believe [sic] that you can appreciate my reason for not seeking public commentary," wrote Tony in the formal "statement style" better befitting a public official and probably suggested, if not dictated, by a superior in the Central Intelligence Agency.

"C-I-A?" asked the cute little Japanese girl at the front desk of the Amarin, enunciating each of the letters, smiling slightly with glittering white teeth, raising her eyebrows flir-

Poc is airplane pilot. He works for Continental Air Services." An assistant manager, also Japanese, showed me the registration card Tony had signed only a few days before my arrival at the Amarin last June, in the middle of my search for him. Tony, I learned, generally stayed at the Amarin, only a few blocks from the modernesque American embassy. He was a familiar, beloved character to the staff at the hotel—the opposite of his public image as a sinister, secret killer and trainer of anti-Communist guerrilla warriors.

"Anthony A. Poshepny," read the top line. "Air Ops Officer—Continental Air Services." So Tony, with a record of more combat jumps than any other American civilian in Indochina, had used Continental as his "cover" while training mountain tribesmen to fight against regular Communist troops from both China and North Vietnam. Tony's cover surprised me; I had assumed he would declare himself as some sort of U.S. government "official"—perhaps an adviser to border-patrol police units, the traditional cover under which CIA operatives masquerade in both Thailand and Laos. Still, Continental was a logical choice. Like Air America, Continental regularly ferries men and supplies to distant outposts throughout Indochina. Financed at least in part by the CIA, Continental could hardly balk at providing cover for full-time CIA professionals.

The next two lines on Poc's registration form were even more intriguing than his link with Continental, at least in terms of what he was doing at the present. After "going to," Tony had written, "Udon," the name of the base town in northeastern Thailand from which the United States not only flies bombing missions over all of Laos but also coordinates the guerrilla war on the ground. And where was Tony "coming from," according to the form? His origin was Phitsanulok, a densely jungled mountain province famed for incessant fighting between Commu-

nist-armed guerrillas, most of them members of mountain tribes, and ill-trained Thai army soldiers and policemen. Tony, it seemed, had vanished into the wilds of Phitsanulok (where the jungle is so thick and the slopes so steep as to discourage the toughest American advisers) on a mysterious training venture not known even to most American officials with top-secret security clearances, much less to the girls behind the desk of the Amarin.

"Oh, he's such a nice man," one of the girls in the hotel assured me when I asked how she liked Tony—who, I'd been warned by other journalists, might shoot on sight any reporter discovered snooping too closely into his life. "He has very nice wife and three lovely children," the girl bubbled on, pausing to giggle slightly between phrases. "He comes here on vacation from up-country." The impression Poc has made on the girls at the Amarin is a tribute both to his personality and his stealth. As I discovered while tracing him from the south of Thailand to northern Laos, he already had an opulent home in Udon for his wife, a tribal princess whom he had married a year or so ago. Mrs. Poshepny, a tiny, quick-smiling girl whom Tony had met while training members of the Yao tribe for special missions into China, liked to come to Bangkok to shop while Tony conferred with his CIA associates on the guarded "CIA floor," of the American embassy.

It was ironic that I should have learned that Tony stayed at the Amarin while in Bangkok, for it was only by chance that I had checked in there at the beginning of my search—and only during small talk with the desk clerks that I found one of Tony's registration cards.

The day after I arrived in Bangkok, local journalists gave me my first inkling of some of the rumors surrounding Tony Poc. One of the journalists, Lance Woodruff, formerly a reporter on one of Bangkok's two English-language newspapers and now with the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok, said Poc not only hated reporters but had been known to "do away with people he doesn't like." Woodruff compared Poc to a figure from *Terry and the Pirates* and told me the story of how Poc lined one wall of a house in northern Laos, near the Chinese border, with heads of persons he had killed. None of the contacts I met in Bangkok had the slightest clue as to Tony's whereabouts—except that he was somewhere "up-country" training tribesmen to fight the Communists,

Donald Kirk has batted around the Far East for years, is now based in Tokyo

Still unaware that Poc stayed at the Amarin, I drove to a town named Udon some 325 miles northeast of